

Eat, Drink and Love

Menno Mennonite Church

January 28, 2024

Purpose: To explore the connection between that which we are permitted and our connection to the body.

Message: As people of the body we are given an alternative view of our entitlement and are invited to live in service to our brothers and sisters.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (I will read); Psalm 111 (please read)

Synopsis: Culturally, we are given to think of who we are in terms of our individual rights and responsibilities that we carry. We are quick to consider where our rights are infringed, where we are pushed in ways that we would just as soon not be. The consideration is often more about our entitlement to the way that we want to live more than our responsibility to our community. However as members of the body of Christ we are called to live in consideration of each other in the way we live, the way we act, and the way enact Christ with us impacts the whole of the body gathered.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Now sacrificed to idols: we know that
"all of us possess knowledge."

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ²
Anyone who claims to know something does not
yet have the necessary knowledge;
³ but anyone who loves God is known by God.

⁴ Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols,
we know that "no idol in the world really exists,"
and that "there is no God but one."

⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods
in heaven or on earth—
as in fact there are many gods and many lords--
⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father,
from whom are all things and for whom we exist,
and one Lord, Jesus Christ,
through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge.
Since some have become so accustomed
to idols until now,
they still think of the food they eat
as food offered to an idol;
and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

⁸ "Food will not bring us close to God."
We are no worse off if we do not eat,
and no better off if we do.

⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours
does not somehow become a stumbling block to others.
¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge,
eating in the temple of an idol,
might they not, since their conscience is weak,
be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?

¹¹ So by your knowledge those weak believers
for whom Christ died are destroyed. ¹

² But when you thus sin against members of your family,
and wound their conscience when it is weak,
you sin against Christ.

¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling,
I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

When you consider the characters of the Bible it is hard to really get beyond the basics of how we understand who they are and how they are motivated. The people who populate the story of God and the people of God are typecast for good or ill and it can take some serious consideration to move beyond the way that we see them. We know them for their foibles as much as we recall their gifts. Abraham is faithful, but is not above wondering whether God will make true what was promised, so much so as to give God a helping hand. Moses is always torn between his gifted ability to be the person of God's of way and God's own heart, but also struggles with a people in want of seeing a God at work. David is after God's own heart but is also enthralled with the trappings of worldly power and the temptations it can bring. The prophets speak with boldness of the signs and symbols of what will come by the hand of YHWH but are also frequently as afraid and miserable as the next guy as they encountering the consequences of speaking what people don't want to hear. Things don't much improve with the coming of the Gospels. The disciples—those who we call saints are quick to question and slow to comprehend. The early church with all its hope is also complicated by every agreement that we can imagine. The whole list goes on, and it can be hard to know where to go with any of them.

Paul is no exception. If anything he is the poster child. For as widely read and cited his advice is, there are few of the canon that elicit such strong feelings as Paul. I would include myself among them. Going to Seminary I knew I did not like Paul, so I made up my mind that this was what I was going to be sure and study. As it turns out, I took more Paul than anything else. And I suspect I am not alone. I am guessing that for at least some of you here that were it up to you to revise the canon of books to be in the Bible there would be far fewer letter and far less Paul. Most of the time we see Paul as the ultimate legalist. Both because that is how his writings are most often used, right or wrong, and because he is just so very good at laying down the law. We make Paul play policeman within our debates of the church and extrapolate the boundaries from the issues of the first generations of the church and attempt to apply those principles today while we make sense of them. We leave Paul by far the rule quoting pharisee we knew he once was and don't give a whole lot of credence to the experience of transformation on the way to Damascus. Which is why it is important that we engage him and allow him some movement away from the stereotype we give him.

I can think of no better place to take that on but with these verses. Which I will admit is odd because I am supposing that this may be one of only a few sermons that you are likely to have heard engaging this advice surrounding eating meat sacrificed to idols. As writings that apply with very direct connection to our life and living this is hardly ripped from the headlines. Unless your version of Safeway has a far different spiritual milieu than the one I shop at, idol sacrifice is not a primary consideration of how our food is presented. What we eat seldom if ever becomes a point of contention relative to the nature of our belief. Sure, we might rib each other a bit for our inclinations toward or away from vegetables or not, but it is not a matter of being in good standing. To be clear, our ready processed modern food system is a whole different reality to that of the ancient marketplace where temple food was likely the only meat on offer. As this largely does not apply to us, we often leave it out of our readings and thinkings. But we can think of a similar thing; say Alcohol. In Winnipeg where I served we had a number of public alcoholics who shared readily about the work of their recovery and the struggles that this brings. Which brought up the question: is it OK to drink alcohol within a body alongside people for whom it has been a source of pain and ongoing struggle? Are we willing to give it up in the name of solidarity and support for those who need it? That is a far more reasonable question to engage with.

With this approach in mind, and a broader one still, I think we can now look at Paul's advice. Here, I see us needing to turn to Paul's lawyer skills. This is lawyer not in the ambulance chasing, telephone book ad, loophole finding sort of sense of the word. Paul is playing the advocate but not to form laws and rules. Paul's intent here (and many other places within his letters to the early church) is to construct an understanding of faith and the church that builds on his understanding of what it means to live out the world of faith in the reality of Christ. He is building up to something from the very beginning when he addresses the foolishness of the Cross and the differences between Paul and Apollos. He is constructing a view of the body and of the life of the church that functions for itself to reflect the kingdom that it is a part of. And his argument builds and builds to his climatic point of the organizing principle of the body (the body and its members) and the unifying purpose it holds: to enact love in all things. He rattles through the various issues he wishes to advise the church on in order to call them time and again to the labor of love in and through the name of Christ. Everything else is beside the point for the greatest of these is the shared goal of love.

It is in this sort of out of the way chapter where we can see most clearly the underlying logic at work for Paul's argument. Sure, there is nothing wrong with eating this meat—eat what ever you like. But before you take the liberty that you have and that you are fully granted, before you assert your rights, consider the needs of the others around you who might not see things the same way that you do, and use their well being as your guide in making your choice. Our individual liberty to make our own choices and exercise our own will must be balanced in love with the consequences of those choices and what it would mean for those brothers and sisters in knowing the full repercussions of what your choice may be. Why? Because that is what the witness of Christ demands between one another.

How is that for counter cultural? We know this to be true all too well. Our culture is given to being most jealous of its rights, demanding recompense at the very least if not outright prosecution if our due is not given us when it is what we deserve. Everything from where we sit on the airplane and what that looks like to how we are treated or not by the person serving us at McDonald's to have our rights trampled is quite simply and completely not to be born. Not insisting on our due makes us odd at the very least, suspect at most. Of course there is no virtue in being trampled—that is not what I am saying. But sometimes we do well to remember that the witness of Christ is the witness of redemptive suffering in the name of love. What might it look like to model consideration in our world? Could we do as much and point to the one who calls us to it all the same? That could start some interesting conversations.

It would be revolutionary in the world and it would be even more so within the church. The question has been put to me with some frequency of why it is I think there are so many denominations within the church. At the end of the day the best answer I can give is that there are this many denominations because there are this many ways of living the way of Christ and more beside. We are so given to fracturing over our insistence on the whole docket of doctrinal unnegotiables that it can be hard to draw the commonalities from the lot. So sometimes I wonder whether we have too easily tossed aside the witness of love, the witness to the unification of concern for the other. But far from the broader issues of groups and their choices, we do well to bear the witness of Paul in mind in our regular worship lives: what might we bear and hold up for the sake of others to bring them together in the name of Christ? What would we give up for the sake of witnessing to God's love?

Paul's advice here is typical in its why in ways that we do not always appreciate and give Paul credit for. When we come looking for the legal "thus sayeth the Lord" sort of logic we can find it because it is there. But so to is this far greater undercurrent that complicates our easy vision of Paul the company man reading the company line. His why does not turn to purity, moralism, or the precedent of the law as to what to do or not do. In fact, in speaking to eating of meat he is departing from the purity codes that had long been the staple of keeping kosher and making identity within and for God's people. The question is not one of liberty, he argues, it is one of whether that liberty of itself allows us to ride over all other concerns and individual identities. We are so given to the expectation that everything in our world from the church on out must be tailored precisely to our preferences. I wonder: how might the challenge of acceptance for the sake of the body and as a demonstration of love for each other might take flesh in this our body and our time? How are we being asked to stretch in order to witness to the gospel?

All things are connected, us one to the other. We are in the hard, messy work of making real the kingdom of God in the here and now. We are called to live in love, not in law, reaching out one to the other, helping each other to grow. How can we do that in our everyday lives?

May we hear not only the law, not only the musts, but the radical invitation to what God is doing in us and through us by living in love. Amen.